

GUEST COMMENTARY

Citizens Project aims to bridge philosophical differences

By Amy Divine and Douglas Triggs

Citizens Project's blue "Celebrate Diversity" bumper stickers are now appearing throughout our community, as is a recognition of the growing appeal of the diversity concept. However, some people have expressed the concern that the diversity we celebrate includes only those people with whom we agree and, more specifically, excludes the religious right. This has caused us at Citizens Project to reflect again on the values of tolerance, respect and diversity in our society and to look anew at the religious right and ourselves in these matters. How inclusive are we?

One assumption we make is that tolerance is both a virtue and a necessity in our pluralistic society. Without sufficient tolerance and respect for other legitimate groups in our nation, we risk entering into a new era of ideology-driven society conflict. This type of conflict is being played out in other nations around the world, but it would ill-serve our country now or in the future. We believe that groups in our society have an obligation not only to promote their individual agendas to the best of their abilities, but also to conduct themselves with respect toward other groups and individuals with whom they interact.

As we promote this ideal, to what extent do we practice it when it comes to respecting the worldview of the religious right? We strive to understand and to listen, not to stereotype or deride. But there are two difficulties here. One lies in the inclusion of groups and individuals that would choose not to include others, in respecting a worldview that cannot value diversity and remain true to its own concepts of right and wrong. The other lies in the rhetoric of spiritual warfare that we often hear from the right. How can we successfully be inclusive of those who paint us as an enemy to be defeated?

"We're talking about a battle of ideas . . . we sometimes refer to it as a third world war between those who defend and respect family and traditional values and those who reject them. We do not believe those two can coexist, and those who win will control the hearts and minds of our children." — Paul Hetrick of Focus on the Family, quoted in the National Catholic Reporter, De-

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Religious-right groups often portray the major problems in today's society as a battle between right and wrong, and specifically as between those groups promoting Christian "traditional/family" values and those who fail to fully accept these values. Such groups draw clear lines between good and evil, and the choice can only be one or the other: "We are at war, and these two cannot coexist."

Some have suggested that these "battlefield" scenarios are simply useful propaganda by some groups to motivate their participants toward action or more contributions. Although useful internally, these statements may also do more harm than good in the relationship between religious right groups and others. Those unable to agree with the "traditional values" agendas as enunciated by various organizations (such as Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for America, Citizens for Excellence in Education, Traditional Values Coalition, etc.) are often surprised to learn that they have been banished to a nether world of undifferentiated immorality, with whom the religious right "cannot coexist."

Battlefield rhetoric saddles religious right groups not only with an image of intolerance, but also with an additional burden. They must counter this image with special efforts to exhibit a more human face to their fellow citizens and provide reassurances that their agenda is not as hostile as the warfare statements would imply. They are compelled toward community outreach to promote the view that they are really "good citizens" who, despite their "we will conquer you" rhetoric, can be trusted to responsibly participate in American pluralistic democracy.

Overall, these groups have sent decidedly mixed messages in the area of political compromise, coexistence and tolerance for other legitimate players in our society.

Is Citizens Project any better?

Citizens Project is attempting to promote more tolerance in our city, and our city can easily benefit from an increased dose of tolerance. Our message of tolerance is quite broadly based, to include the religious and religio-political groups here in Colorado Springs and elsewhere. Sadly, some in the city would look upon our move toward increased tolerance as a negative. As one speaker at a recent religious seminar stated, "Tolerance overlooks truth!" But, we believe, appropriate tolerance may be a truth. Unlike the religious right, we are comfortable with the concept of different people pursuing their spirituality and values through different paths, but working together with respect in our great nation.

On the other side, we now view with increasing concern the religious right's repeated statements of "we will win," "God is on our side," and "if we are right, then you must be wrong." That concern has provoked a certain intolerance by us of that portion of the religious right's message.

For that reason, we have moved closer to accepting the religious right's method for grappling with the world: We love the "sinner" (the religious right people we have come to know and respect), but we hate their "sin" (an uncompromising and disrespectful spiritual warfare model).

Upon reflection, we have been struck by some similarities between Citizens Project and the religious right in this area, as well as by a number of differences. We all experience certain mirror-image problems. Members of many segments of our community, including gays and lesbians and the religious right, feel attacked, stereotyped and disenfranchised. Those of us who do not conform to a religious right worldview feel threatened by an impending imposition of values that will leave

us unable to live by the values we hold dear. Those on the religious right articulate the same threat. How can we protect ourselves from these threats while respecting the rights of all?

The mirror analogy only goes so far, however. Although we may experience the same sense of threat to our families and our values, our worldviews hold essential differences. One view recognizes the value of diversity; the other recognizes an absolute moral authority that, according to Summit Ministries, "assumes Biblical Christianity to be true, and other worldviews to be threats to the ultimate welfare of mankind. . ."

Can we coexist or must this be warfare? Can we be inclusive and also protect our children from those who would recruit them into an absolute worldview that may conflict with the values of tolerance we wish to pass on?

To make progress in resolving this dilemma, we must look to a different model. If opposing sides are all we know — we versus them — we become locked into an image of uncompromising warfare. We will all perceive our threats, stereotype our enemies, belittle the rights of others; and continue to splinter our community.

Is there another way? Dialogue may be the beginning of understanding and appreciating our similarities and promoting respect for differing values and spiritual paths. But can we actually resolve some of our essential value differences? Or, are we simply fated to eternally disagree, as we work to keep that disagreement within tolerable boundaries?

We here at Citizens Project do not know the answer, but we are thinking about the problem. We are also starting the dialogue process with various religious right groups in this area. We challenge members of this community to explore these issues of tolerance and diversity and together to seek a healthy and respectful coexistence for all.

Divine and Triggs are co-founders of Citizens Project. This article is a condensed version of "Thoughts on the Diversity Dilemma," available from Citizens Project at 520-9899.

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